

WHO AM I?

**WHAT DNA DOESN'T
TELL US ABOUT IDENTITY**

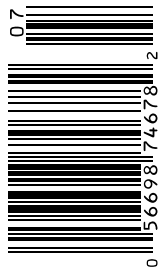
faith in action for social justice

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July 2019

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Vol.48 No.7

**A CHURCH
TAKES ON
SEXUAL ABUSE**

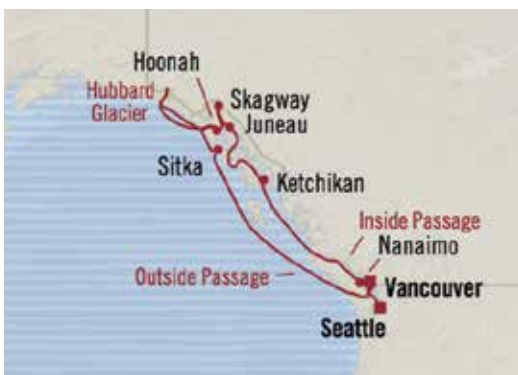
PAGE 28

**WALTER
BRUEGGEMANN
ON GOD'S
PECULIAR HOPE**

PAGE 32

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“WHEN A DNA TEST SAYS ‘26 PERCENT SPAIN,’ WHAT DOES ‘SPAIN’ MEAN?”

Who Am I?

For \$99, I can swab my cheek and send off my DNA for analysis. But what does that tell me about identity?

by Daniel José
Camacho



22

28

Let There Be Light Church sexual abuse is too often shrouded in secrecy. But Rev. Heidi Hankel and her congregation refused to let it stay hidden.

by Jenna
Barnett

32

The Company of the Unafraid God's peculiar hope offers a way to keep fear from overpowering us.

by Walter
Brueggemann

Voices

6	Spotlight
9	Hearts & Minds Our look may be different but our truth-telling-to-power ethic hasn't changed a bit. by Jim Wallis
	Commentary
12	Green New Deal When political leaders are befuddled, look to the grassroots. by Alexandra Tempus
14	Seminary Life Women are in classrooms, but respect—and jobs—still aren't guaranteed. by Kaitlyn Schiess
15	Debt Teams Why church members are paying each other's credit card debt. by Joshua Grace
	Columns
16	Under the Sun How my reading list is opening up new horizons. by Jeania Ree V. Moore
18	Deep Economy The water is rising, but God is not the culprit. by Bill McKibben
19	Soul Work To live a life of justice, we must also practice regular self-reflection. by Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros
	Eyewitness
20	When fires burn through a community, what remains? by Ann Sullivan



46



41

Vision

	Culture
39	Dance Lauren Anderson transcends—and stretches—the bounds of classical ballet. by Ronya-Lee Anderson
41	On Film Thirty years of <i>Do the Right Thing</i> . by Abby Olcese
42	Curated The creative spirit is not limited by the -isms of the world. by Faith-Marie Zamblé
	Reviews
43	Books Faithful guidance for LGBTQ couples in <i>Modern Kinship</i> . by Da'Shawn Mosley
44	Studying the flesh-and-blood details of a still-healing community. by Josina Guess
45	New poems on loving and being loved. by Lou Ella Hickman
	Poetry
46	The spirit too has cycles that begin with honest thirst. by Richard Schiffman
	Living the Word
48	In Pentecost, God sends believers to do big things. by Kenyatta R. Gilbert
	H'rumpths
50	If you haven't noticed, <i>Sojourners</i> has been completely redesigned. by Ed Spivey Jr.

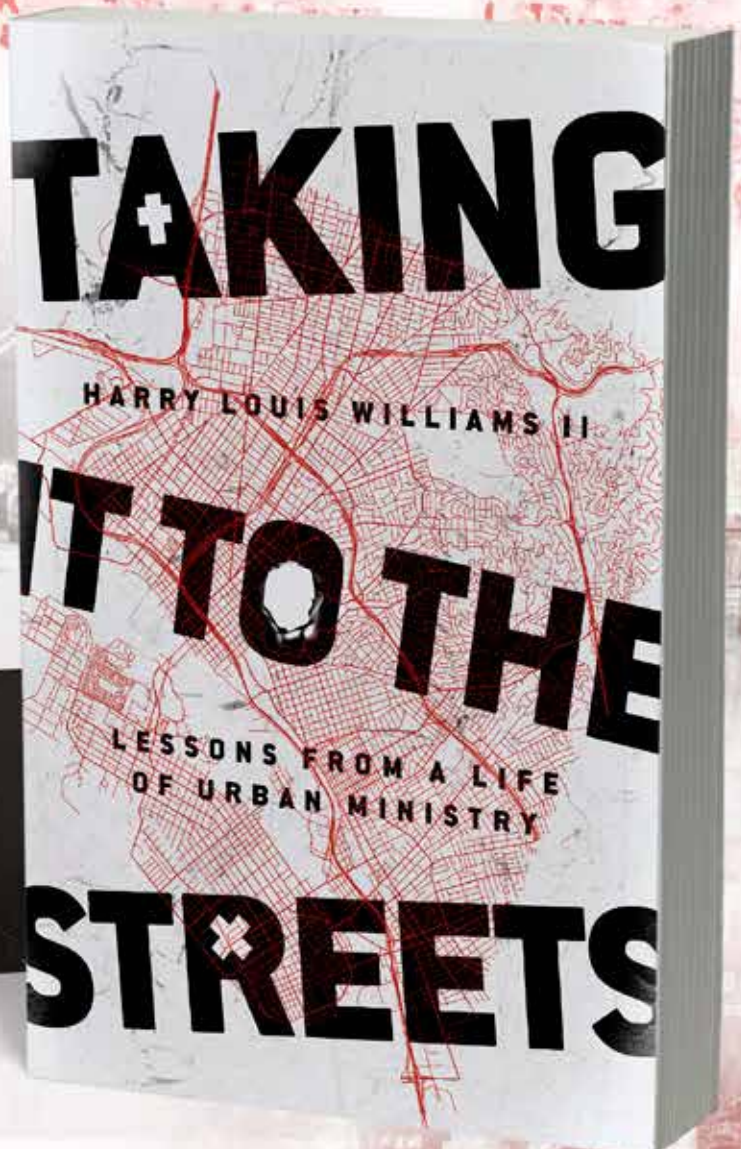
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SHAWN CASSELBERRY,
executive director of Mission Year

From the Editor

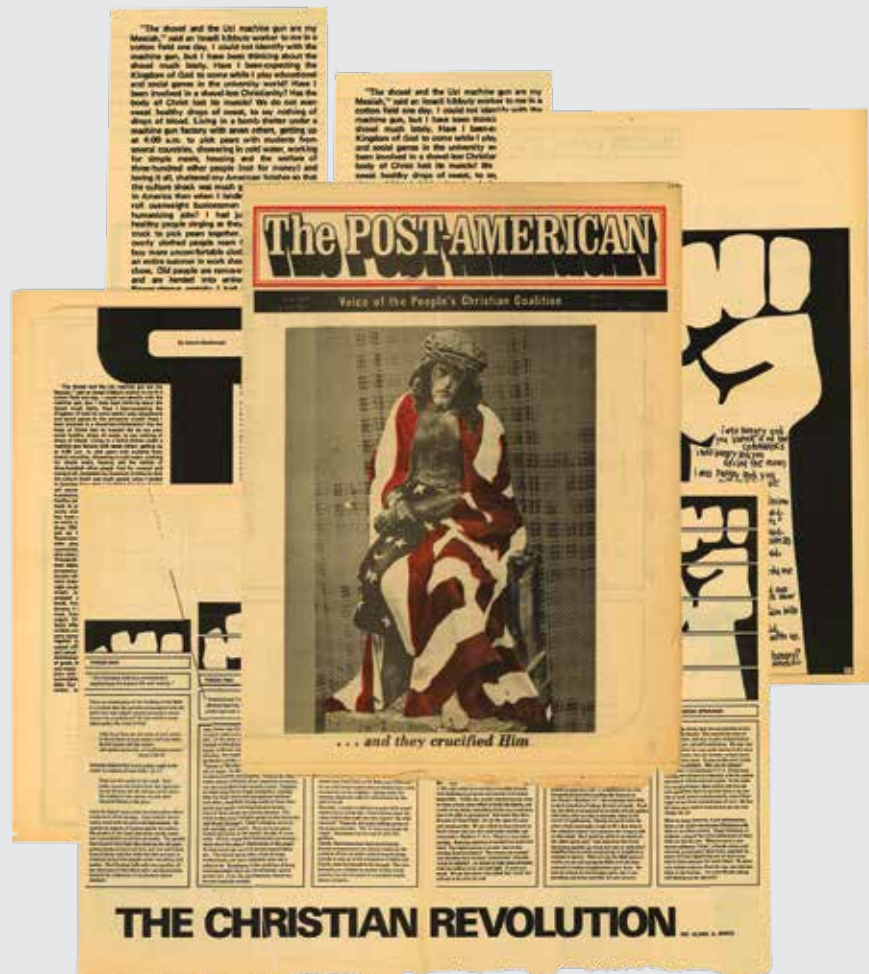
Jesuit spirituality revolves around the task of finding God in all things, reflecting on the meaning of the actions and events around us, and acting in the world as “people for others.” Those principles, in many ways, speak to the vocation of *Sojourners*—we don’t just cover news, we seek to understand how God is working in the world. And we’re not merely reporting on events, we’re working to be agents of transformation through the people we highlight and the stories we tell. That’s been the heart of our mission since we began as *The Post-American* decades ago—and it will continue to be as we move forward with our new, redesigned look. Thanks for joining us on this unpredictable adventure of radical faith.

RESPONSE

“Maybe Just Listen”

In “Remembrance and Repentance” (May 2019), Kimberly Burge wrote about her church, founded by Methodists who had split from their denomination in 1844 “so that its members could defend slavery while remaining within the church.” For Burge and her fellow parishioners, facing this history has led to public repentance. But not all readers were convinced: “You don’t have to repent for the sins of dead people. They are not your sins,” commented Joe-Alan Doty [f](#) in response. Other readers took a different approach: “If systemic racism had an end date, I’d agree with you,” replied Elizabeth Shedd. [f](#) “But since it’s endured and left room for those modern sins that the article details, the comfort of white people should not be what steers the conversation. Maybe just listen.”

Write us at response@sojo.net.



"IF YOU WITNESS ABUSE OF POWER, DON'T WALK AWAY."

Rachel Held Evans (1981-2019)
from sojo.net

CONTRIBUTING



Jeania Ree V. Moore

A scholar-activist living in Washington, D.C., Jeania Ree V. Moore has written about African-American women's quilting traditions, lynching photography, nonhuman animals, and soul food as theological topics—part of what she describes as the “broad and kind of boundless field” of theological aesthetics, or how people explore the divine through the arts, their senses, and abstract notions such as “beauty” or “ugliness.” In her new column, “Under the Sun,” she describes what happened when she challenged herself—and her friends—to read exclusively authors of color for a year (p.16).



Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros

“I get really geeked out and curious about people’s lived experiences and how they understand or imagine God,” confesses Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros, whose new column, “Soul Work,” debuts on p.19. As a Tejana poet and writer from the south side of San Antonio, Hinojosa-Cisneros writes about Latinidad and faith, sometimes interweaving Spanish, English, and Indigenous languages. “I just want people to find home in my words—whatever ‘home’ is for them,” she says.

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The Post-American
in 1971.

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OUR MISSION

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1

HEARTS & MINDS

BY JIM WALLIS

OUR NEW LOOK

Since our earliest days publishing in tabloid format on newsprint, *Sojourners* (nee *The Post-American*) has never sought to be slick or trendy. But the magazine has always addressed timely issues, and we want our look and feel to reflect that. That means, every decade or so, we've engaged in a process of redesigning the visual presentation of the magazine. You're currently holding the fruits of our latest effort in your hands, and we hope you love it as much as we do.

Some of the changes in our pages will be obvious: We have a new logo, new fonts, and new departments and columns. But while the look may be new, it's rooted in our beginnings more than 40 years ago. When we launched *The Post-American*

cont'd on next page

**"OUR COMMITMENT
TO BE AN ESSENTIAL
VOICE ON FAITH AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE
REMAINS AS STRONG
AS EVER."**

“OUR PERILOUS POLITICAL MOMENT MUST LEAD TO MORE THAN RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL.”

cont'd from previous page in 1971, we sought to convey the bold, countercultural nature of our message with arresting, artistic imagery and text that leapt off the page. The cover of the first issue, featuring Jesus draped in the American flag with the line “and they crucified Him,” feels as painfully timely today as it did in 1971. We felt the Spirit moving us in our vocation to model that prophetic truth-telling-to-power ethic—for which we have always been known—even more strongly in our updated visual presentation.

Accordingly, you may notice in this issue and should expect to see going forward a stronger focus on art in our graphics and an embrace of some new styles for us. Overall, we hope this new design by Metaleap Creative will evoke a contemporary take on our roots as a scrappy, student-created paper, which you will see reflected at points in our typography and art choices. Carrying that legacy forward also means that we are doubling down on seeking strong writing, photography, and reporting on the intersection of faith and social justice from different generations, countries, and backgrounds.



Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of *Sojourners* magazine.

I think you will like our new, diverse, and dynamic columnists and be grateful for the many unique and powerful voices who continue with us as both columnists and contributing editors. I'm also excited to welcome Sojourners' executive director, Adam Russell Taylor, who will be alternating with me in writing the opening column, beginning in August.

While our look may be different, our commitment to be an essential voice on faith and social justice remains as strong as ever as we look to the months and years ahead. The perilous political moment in which we find ourselves must lead to more than resistance and survival. Like any historical moment, this one offers the opportunity to reveal the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is where *The Post-American* began and how we will continue to go forward. Any gospel that is not good news to the poor is not the gospel of Jesus—period. And when Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and even our enemies—with no exceptions—he really means it.

The relationship of faith to politics is not a transactional, Faustian bargain for power, as some white evangelicals have now made it. Rather, a pastoral and healing word and prophetic witness are always the “salt and light” most needed for the common good. As one of our mentors, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., put it, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.” Sojourners will remember that as we reflect, write, and act.

We are richly blessed to have you along for that journey. ✕



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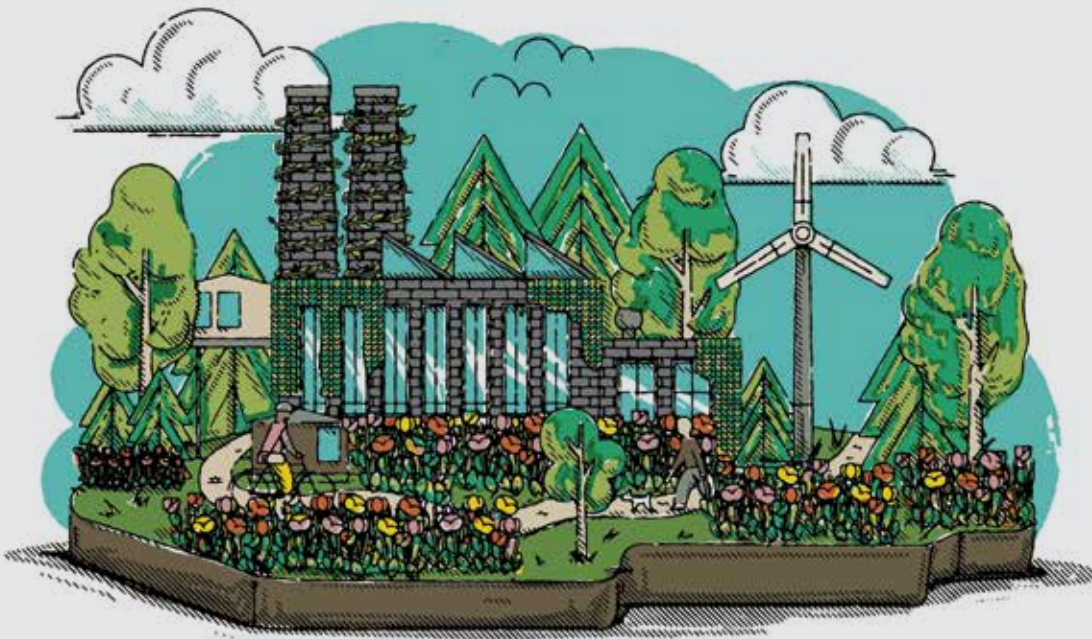
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KEEP IT ON THE GROUND

The Green New Deal lays out an overarching vision, but its real power is in grassroots action.



2

Soon after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell brought the resolution for a Green New Deal to a sham procedural vote in March, a clip of its co-sponsor, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, went viral.

“You want to tell people that their concern and their desire for clean air and clean water is elitist? Tell that to the kids in the South Bronx which are suffering from the highest rates of childhood asthma in the country,” Ocasio-Cortez said. “Tell that to the families in Flint whose kids’ blood is ascending in lead levels.”

It was an illuminating statement. The Green New Deal had rapidly emerged on the heels of a report by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that puts the deadline for massive, coordinated action to avoid the worst of climate change at 12 years out. Now is the time for an audacious proposal of the kind climate activists have long pushed for, one that matches the planetary crisis in scale and scope.

Indeed, calling it the Green New Deal was an intentional reference to the national mobilization that resuscitated America from the Great Depression. Shortly after the GOP-controlled Senate voted down the Green New Deal (for now), *The New York Times* eulogized it as a “grand reimagining” of “sweeping ambitions.”

Maybe so. But foremost in Ocasio-Cortez’s mind? The families of Flint. The kids in the Bronx.

While climate change will indeed require a radical remaking of our economic system and of global society, its impacts only mean something when they hit home. A Green New Deal was never meant to accomplish everything at the federal level. Ocasio-Cortez herself called it simply a “vision document”—with broad outlines shaped by years of advocacy by environmental justice groups on the ground. It’s clear that any future version of the Green New Deal must be rooted in communities—supporting and building up from the work they have long been doing.

“In order to succeed, the Green New Deal must center and support the work being done by the frontline of the climate crisis and work with us, not speak for us,” Elizabeth Yeampierre, executive director of the Brooklyn-based environmental justice group UPROSE, told me in an email. Yeampierre was part of a delegation of the Climate Justice Alliance that met with Ocasio-Cortez and influenced the language in the resolution. And the Green New Deal does include several provisions that involve working with locals at the community level to facilitate the transition away from a fossil-fuel economy.

One such provision, involving “building resiliency against climate-change-related disasters” by “providing investments for community-defined projects,” might as well have cited UPROSE by name. For years the activists of UPROSE have been protesting and urging reconsideration from New York City officials and private developers who seek to transform their native Sunset Park, Brooklyn, into “Industry City”—a slick development expansion on the borough waterfront that the group says will pre-empt equitable climate-resiliency projects and eventually displace them through gentrification. In March 2019, after local officials intervened, Industry City plans were put on hold pending more community consultation.

Another project proposed in the Green New Deal includes working collaboratively with farmers to build “a more sustainable food system that ensures universal access to healthy food.” Those doing so might take a page from Familias Unidas por la Justicia, a farmworkers union in Washington state that has developed an alternative cooperative, Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad. Farmworkers

“IN ORDER TO SUCCEED, THE GREEN NEW DEAL MUST CENTER WORK DONE ON THE FRONTLINE OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS.”

participating in the co-op can escape virtual indentured servitude at corporate farming operations and instead, according to *The Nation*, “decide everything from how to produce and distribute their crops, to what tasks need to be completed each day” and can become worker-owners of the land itself.

Likewise, the Huntley Alliance in Tonawanda, a suburb of Buffalo, New York, provides a neat model for what the Green New Deal resolution calls “prioritizing high-quality job creation and economic, social, and environmental benefits in frontline and vulnerable communities and deindustrialized communities” that “may otherwise struggle with the transition” away from a fossil fuel economy. After a coal-fired power plant in town shut down, the alliance successfully pushed the state of New York to provide “gap funds” to keep the city up and running until it could transition to its new economy.

“If a state as geographically, politically, and economically complicated as New York is capable of this,” an expert in sustainable planning told Grist, “then other states can look for parallels.”

The IPCC report has many believing there are just 12 years left until utter catastrophe. But the truth is, there’s no precise moment that will mark the end of the whole world. The safety and stability of your world, as you know it, depends largely on where you live and the capacity your community has to respond to its immediate conditions. And it’s this deep, place-based knowledge baked into community organizations that will lead the necessary reorganization of society.

“Climate policy might befuddle Democratic leadership,” Julian Brave Noisecat of 350 Action put it in a *Times* opinion column, “but the grassroots knows what’s up.” ♦

Alexandra Tempus has written on climate change, place, and belonging for *The Progressive*, *Orion*, *The Nation*, *VICE News*, and others. She lives in Madison, Wis.

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“I was able to intentionally integrate theory and practice, taking creative risks through this program. With a team, I developed a deeply relational worship service integrating study, prayer, friendship, accountability, and generosity, set in museums and parks. Here, the intersections of art, poverty, justice, climate change and the ritual of communion weaved together. I graduate from Wesley excited for creating creative, collaborative ways of being church.”

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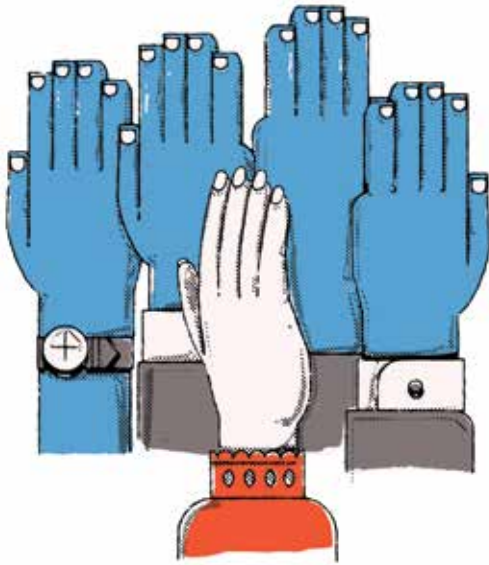


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COMMENTARY

BY KAITLYN SCHIESS



THE DEVIL DOESN'T NEED AN ADVOCATE

The guy in my seminary class will do just fine.

"We're not here to seduce you," I said.

The laughter signaled that my comment had pushed a boundary but not broken it. When the moderator at my evangelical seminary's student orientation asked about friendships between men and women on campus, I answered honestly. I wanted to be viewed as a student, not a threat.

Women seminarians, regardless of where we study, navigate a world not made for us. Many of us study in institutions with long histories of denying our admission, read from syllabi devoid of women scholars, and study under professors who merely tolerate our presence. My own seminary first admitted women as full students in 1975 and into all degree programs in 1986.

Whether we want to or not, women in seminaries live with constant reminders of our strange position—studying in buildings named after professors who denied our inclusion, learning the history of our institutions with the knowledge we would not have been welcomed for much of it, and choosing classes to avoid professors who still begrudge our presence.

I have had incredible male classmates who intentionally sought out my perspective in class and who brought sexist comments by professors to the attention of the administration. Yet many women students struggle to artic-

ulate what our experience is really like. Our male colleagues may notice some particularly explicit inappropriate comments, but few understand the weight and drain of living like an uninvited guest in your own school.

Women and men—on a seminary campus, on a church staff, in many places in the world—are not on equal footing. And that inequality is both structural and exacerbated by the sexist suspicion of or fear of women. When women are viewed as sexual threats, we miss out on our male classmates' study groups, mentoring by male professors, and internship and job opportunities. Few women seminary students sense a clear path forward for the calling God has placed on their lives, and much of that is due to the lack of community created by sexist assumptions about male-female relationships.

When I expressed this to a male student recently, he responded that things have shifted so drastically that I had the advantage. "They want women now," he said.

The fact that some institutions have decided now to value the perspectives of the marginalized is a far cry from the historic structural disadvantage that impacts the experience of women seminary students. No, the tables have not yet turned.

No matter how progressive or egalitarian an evangelical seminary is, cultural assumptions about women's intelligence and experience often prevail. Women must fight for the credibility and authority that male classmates are granted automatically. We have learned to brace ourselves when conversations about gender and women's roles come up. We don't have the privilege of entering conversations about gender as impersonal observers; we are deeply impacted by comments made or conclusions drawn.

During a heated conversation on a controversial biblical passage in 1 Timothy 2 about women's roles, a fellow student began his sexist remark with the phrase, "To play devil's advocate here" The women in the room knew all too well that the devil doesn't need one.

From our male classmates, we need more than welcome: We need fierce advocacy. We need men who believe that we bring perspectives, talents, and knowledge that are so necessary they deserve to be fought for.

We don't want to be guests, welcome or not, in someone else's home. We want to be co-owners with the right to rearrange the furniture. ♦

Kaitlyn Schiess is a writer and student working on her master's in theology from Dallas Theological Seminary.

C

WIPING OUT DEBT, ONE CARD AT A TIME

Credit card debt plagues our communities. The average U.S. household carries a balance of \$6,929 at the end of the month. And if you miss a payment, interest may jump from 15 percent to more than 20 percent.

Credit cards are part of a predatory industry with a history of racial bias. Many people can afford only the minimum monthly payment, barely making a dent in the principal—just as the system was designed.

About 10 years ago at Circle of Hope, my church in Philadelphia, we began experimenting with “credit card debt annihilation.” Our team’s motto came from Romans 13, where the apostle Paul urged believers to “owe no one anything,” except love.

We identified church members with credit card debt and an income. We established three cohorts with a half dozen participants in each. Each member covenanted to 100-percent financial transparency within their cohort, to meet monthly with the group and with their financial coach, and to stop using credit cards. Each cohort started with seed money and a three-year payoff plan to bring the whole cohort out of credit card debt.

We discerned an order of debt annihilation. Usually the card with the highest interest rate, among all the cohort members, was paid off first. We paid off one line of credit at a time, working down the list.

The biggest impact was made on the first day, when the seed money paid off the most problematic cards. As we worked down the list, each participant made their own minimum payment, if they still had a balance, and also paid \$50 to \$100 more to the credit card of focus, regardless of who had that card. Members actually wrote checks to someone else’s lender with that person’s name and account number in the memo line.

After someone’s credit debt was annihilated, they kept paying in the same order. The amount that formerly went to their own minimum got added to their third-party check each month and sent to the specific lender. And thus, the snowball grew. The size of the concentrated payments increased



**“OWE NO ONE
ANYTHING,
EXCEPT LOVE.”**

as each card got paid off. When, together, we paid off all the balances, the seed money was replenished and passed on to the next group.

We decided to focus on credit card debt because of its fluctuating interest rates and relatively smaller amounts, compared to home mortgages or student debt—and because of the shame carried by people with this kind of debt.

Members of our cohorts had used their cards for temporary financial relief. When they needed money, they had turned to a lending corporation rather than to community. Their debt stories—how their debts grew—ranged from impulsive shopping to medical debt to a housing crisis.

As a church, we are practicing putting limits on oppression from the dominant corporation culture, much in the way the Hebrews imagined and practiced during their formation in the wilderness. The sabbatical year (or *shmita*), the traditional Hebrew agricultural sabbath year practiced every seven years, culminated in the vision of the Jubilee year. This redistribution of land and release from debt bondage socialized the Hebrew people away from intergenerational poverty and wealth. Just as Sabbath teaches rest as resistance, setting a limit to oppressive working conditions, so freedom from credit card debt sets mutuality, trust, and simplicity as limits to our economic oppression.

We’ve completed three cohorts using this strategy, eliminating more than \$100,000 in principal debt, and we probably have saved as much in interest. Inspired by good stories of resistance in scripture, we’re trying to embody new possibilities, moving together from shame into trust and from bondage into mutuality. ✕



Joshua Grace is a Polish-American settler living with his family in Philadelphia, traditional land of the Lenni Lenape.

MY YEAR OF READING X

3



Summer signals freedom. If you are anything like me, two words in particular shimmer with the season's promise of boundlessness: Summer reading.

At the beginning of Black History Month back in February, however, I decided to restrict my reading for this year. Some friends and I embarked on what I christened a "Year of Reading X"—a year of reading only, or mostly, books by black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and other authors of color.

While recent discussions around the whiteness of the publishing industry and Western canon have motivated many to make racially aware reading commitments, exclusively reading black authors or authors of color is not novel. People of color have long been aware of the whiteness of the conven-

**"THESE QUESTIONS ARE
SPIRITUAL AND NOT JUST
LITERARY, INTIMATING BELIEFS
ABOUT GOD, HUMANS, AND
POSSIBILITY."**

tional literary world and have negotiated it accordingly, finding and creating our own spaces. What sparks my year of reading, then?

I started this Year of Reading X, and invited friends to join me, after hearing several otherwise unconnected black voices raise the often unspoken assumption that reading only books by black authors is difficult, ultimately depressing, and inevitably populated by slave narratives and other accounts of trauma, struggle, and pain. In other words, relegating ourselves to our own literature yields overwhelmingly sad stories with no happy endings.

My lifelong experience reading black-authored books refutes this assumption and reframes its notion of happy ending with a more profound sense of joy and meaning. Recent favorites include antebellum autobiography (*My Bondage and My Freedom*, by Frederick Douglass), post-apocalyptic fantasy (*Who Fears Death*, by Nnedi Okorafor), theological memoir (*Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian*, by James Cone), and romance novel (anything by Beverly Jenkins). The deeper questions the assumption raises, though, tug at me: What kinds of stories are told about black people such that our lives are equated with pain and suffering? What truths and untruths do we use to imagine ourselves?

This year, I seek to address these questions, which are spiritual and not just literary, intimating beliefs about God, humans, and possibility. I also seek to engage stories of our traumas past and present, finding new ways to hold them with strength and freedom. Given the far-reaching realities of racism and colonialism, these questions apply to people of color broadly. As an avid reader with favorite authors of color across genre, I intend this year to find more.

The “X” in my name for this year of reading with friends does double work. It represents our individual determinations of effort and ethnicity. “X” also signifies, in the sense of Malcolm, a rejection of white-centered ways of naming and seeing that persist in internalized ways. Intentionally establishing boundaries to read solely authors of color uncovers a deeper boundlessness, one that resists the limitations of imagination set by society, economy, or ourselves.

Despite the assumption of narrowed horizons, in reading black books the world opens up. With this summer’s reading, I am living into freedom of a different sort. ✱

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a United Methodist deacon who writes theological aesthetics, practices the arts, and works in faith-based social justice in Washington, D.C.

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SOJOURNERS

DEEP ECONOMY

BY BILL MCKIBBEN

DON'T BLAME GOD



A

As I write this, I'm looking at images from the disastrous floods in the Midwest and in Mozambique. One is in the heartland of the planet's richest country and the other on the edge of the poorest continent, but from the air they look a lot alike: waters spread across farmland and cityscape, humans huddled in shelters. They look, actually, "biblical," to use the word that is sometimes employed

to describe devastation on an immense scale.

Flood, of course, was God's weapon of choice early on, when, pissed off at the general humanness of humans, he vowed to cleanse the earth. But he made an exception for the faithful Noah, and perhaps more important he made an exception for everything else on earth: In this early-on iteration of the Endangered Species Act, he made sure that a breeding pair of everything got on board the ark. And then, once the waters receded, he made the covenant

**"GOD FLOODED NOAH'S WORLD,
AND WE ARE FLOODING OURS."**

with the surviving humans that guaranteed he would never flood the planet again.

And yet it is flooding: The water is steadily rising, the rainfalls steadily growing more intense. Texas had the greatest rainstorm in American history about two years ago, when Hurricane Harvey dropped five feet of water on parts of the state. Five feet: Think about that.

One needn't, I think, worry very much about the theology of the covenant. It should be clear that all God is promising is that God won't flood the earth again. The very existence of a covenant implies that the other side has the agency to do or not do as it pleases. And what we have pleased to do is burn coal and gas and oil at unsustainable rates until the planet heats. And when the planet heats, glaciers melt. Water as it warms expands to take up more space. We've been told, explicitly, about all this: Scientists, using the gifts of intelligence that God gave them, have made it clear precisely what's happening.

But we're like all the other people who were not Noah. We don't want to hear it; we want to go on with business as usual. And so some of us wield religion as a kind of amulet—a Get-Out-of-Floodwaters-Free card. Mozambique and the Midwest are among the more Christian places on the planet: I have no doubt that there are preachers this weekend explaining from the pulpit that God will prevent disaster.

God, it seems abundantly clear, does not want flooding. We want flooding—or at least we want it more than we want change. We're willing to watch our brothers and sisters drown, and to risk drowning ourselves, rather than stand up to the powers and principalities that keep us stuck in the fossil-fuel age. White Christians, overwhelmingly, voted for Trump, after Trump declared climate change a hoax. No clearer and more tragic example of free will exists. So, no one blame God, and no one count on God to get us out of this. God flooded Noah's world, and we are flooding ours. ✕

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, is the author most recently of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* (April 2019).



FIGHTING INJUSTICE—AND OUR OWN COMPLICITY

To live a life of justice, we must also live a life of constant self-reflection. My work as a writer, activist, and woman of faith informs my actions in matters of justice, which I call soul work. Yet, if I cannot examine the ways I am complicit in oppressive structures, I become part of the problem. I never want to assume that my justice work, my soul work, is not in need of introspection.

I learned about spiritual activism from reading AnaLouise Keating's scholarship of Gloria Anzaldúa's theopoetic work, which focuses on navigating between spaces such as home, language, the academy, gender, and spirituality, among other conceived and imagined spaces. A theopoetic work wrestles

with the tension of in-between spaces when theological language fails us and we must instead take up a form of spiritual activism—advocating for our own inner healing while addressing the injustices of the world.

Spiritual activism is the sacred way we advocate for social change. It is a call to action and a call to heal. As we navigate this in-between space, it is imperative that we self-examine and take inventory of our methods of action. For example, as a woman of color, if I assume or am complicit in my language, I will relegate all women of color (i.e. black, Indigenous, Palestinian, Central American, etc.) to an overarching assumption that all women of color face the same oppressive structures.

For me, spiritual activism is the awareness of conceived and imagined spaces I inhabit as a human being and as a woman of faith in relation to others and their experiences. I recognize the contradiction between spirit and activism. Yet, one cannot work without the other if we are to engage in a process that keeps us self-aware. The spiritual draws from the soul, from the very core of who we are or are to become. Activism draws from politics, from a tension that if left untreated will fester. The spiritual draws us into ourselves as a reflection of what is happening around us; it situates us in a God-centered space. Activism engages us to respond to a shared space that has become subjugated and no longer reflects the *imago dei*.

I have found that reading widely and social media engagement have been helpful as I seek personal self-reflection in the face of injustices. Before I engage in a conversation verbally, or in a digital space, I examine my own space. Even as a woman of color, I hold a certain privilege that must be acknowledged and dismantled before I can offer dialogue or critique in conversations. We must do the work that matters—soul work. And in our attempts to fight injustice, we must never overlook the ways we are complicit. ♦

**“EVEN AS A WOMAN
OF COLOR, I HOLD A
CERTAIN PRIVILEGE
THAT MUST BE
ACKNOWLEDGED
AND DISMANTLED.”**

Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros is a Tejana, Chicana, and Mujerista from San Antonio, where she is a graduate student at Our Lady of the Lake University. She is the 2019 Recipient of the Rubem Alves Award in Theopoetics.

EYEWITNESS

4



"I TALK TO A WOMAN
PROBABLY FOUR
TIMES A WEEK AND
SHE'S STILL LIVING
IN HER CAR."

WHEN FIRES BURN THROUGH A COMMUNITY, WHAT REMAINS?

The thing moved so fast, it was just like a matchbox. It just moved so fast. Nobody in my parish passed away because of the fire. There are about 60 or 70 families that identify with our parish, and most of those people lost their homes. I didn't know my own house was burned until about 48 hours in—that's when I got that confirmation.

If you walked through Paradise today, you'd see debris, burnt-out cars, and a huge amount of devastation. Burnt trees. Homes are gone. I mean it's pretty much like a war zone. There's a pastors meeting up there once a month, which I haven't gone to every time because I find it incredibly hard to go up there.

People's lives have been changed—pretty much changed forever. I talk to a woman probably four times a week and she's still living in her car. And I get her a hotel room about once a week to try to take away some of the struggle. I wish I could do it five times a week but I only have so many resources.

I think the hardest part is the grief from all the displacement because of the devastation. Biblically, you know, it's the whole diaspora thing. It was so profound right away just identifying with that story of the exiles who were living away from their homeland for 70 years. And then when they went back, everything was different. And not everybody went back, kind of like us. Most people are not going back. ✕

Rev. Ann Sullivan, pastor of St. Nicholas' Episcopal Church in Paradise, Calif., is currently living in Chico, Calif. She spoke with *Sojourners* associate editor Betsy Shirley about the November 2018 wildfire that destroyed Paradise.

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The background of the page is a solid dark gray. It is decorated with numerous horizontal lines of varying lengths and colors. Most lines are dark gray, but several are a vibrant red. These lines are scattered across the page, some appearing in small groups and others in isolation, creating a subtle, textured effect. The lines vary in thickness and are positioned at different heights and widths, contributing to an abstract, digital aesthetic.

Who Am I?

WHAT ANCESTRY DNA CAN'T TELL YOU ABOUT IDENTITY.

BY DANIEL JOSÉ CAMACHO

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE McQUADE

PAGE 23 / JULY 2019

I'm

highly suspicious of the growing obsession with genetic ancestry tests. 23andMe. AncestryDNA. People can now scrape their inner cheek with a swab, mail it to a company for \$99, and brag to you about a cultural or racial epiphany they've had based on being 4.7 percent of something. Who knows how this personal genetic information might be used. I suspect these companies respect people's privacy as much as Facebook does. I've heard that governments and police departments are already using this information to track people. ¶ And yet, I would be lying if I said I haven't thought about purchasing a DNA kit for myself. Yes, I know that such tests provide limited and potentially misleading information. Yes, I understand that they fuel problematic framings of race that tie race to genetics when race is actually something socially and politically constructed. But I'm still curious! ¶ I don't know if I will ever take a test. I ask myself: Should I be contributing to this system? Could I convince *Sojourners* to pay for my test if I were to write an article about it, thus shifting some of the ethical burden away from me as an individual? ¶ Thankfully, I was able to cheat. Sort of. My brother recently took a test through AncestryDNA. He sent a link to the results in our

siblings group text saying that we should have the exact same results. While what he said was inaccurate—because siblings who share the same two parents can still vary in the percentage of DNA taken from each parent—I did not fact-check his text. I simply replied “thank you” and happily clicked.

An elaborate breakdown pops up: 26 percent Spain; 18 percent Native American from North and Central America; 14 percent Cameroon, Congo, and Southern Bantu peoples; 12 percent Portugal; 8 percent Andean Native American; 5 percent France; 4 percent Benin/Togo; 3 percent Mali; 2 percent Basque; 2 percent Middle East; 1 percent Senegal; 1 percent European Jewish; 1 percent Ivory Coast/Ghana.

WHAT IS “SPAIN”?

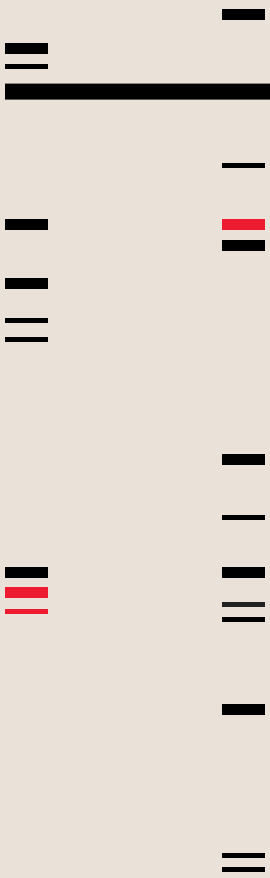
Upon seeing these results, the first thing that came to mind is that there's a high probability that I have significantly more Native American ancestry than Elizabeth Warren. The next thing is what this test does and doesn't reveal. It shows the obvious: Behind categories such as Latino and Colombian exists a highly mixed heritage stretching back to the period of conquest and slavery, and to the Iberian Peninsula. But at the same time, the test can't tell me how I see myself. And it certainly can't control how others see me.

So what if I do have a significant amount of Native American ancestry or African ancestry? Does that mean I should identify as Native or African? That would be absurd. I lack continuity with such communities. But erasing that part of my heritage also seems wrong. I want to honor my ancestry but not exploit it. I can hear an agent or publicist saying, “Daniel, if you lean into X part of your identity, you can increase your market share and increase the number of topics and venues in which you are perceived as an expert.”

Or I could play the game of identity overcompensation. Having been negligent of certain parts of my heritage, I could—later in life—come to a dramatic awakening in which all of my social media posts become me sharing Bantu proverbs and burning sage. But this would feel cheap, like a projection, a shallow performance. It wouldn't be the real me. It would be a certain packaging of me.

Still, I don't want to erase my black and indigenous roots in some North American meltingpot of whiteness. I don't want to only privilege my European heritage. There is something true and subversive about refusing to forget one's ancestry while living in a vast sea of assimilating forgetfulness. But how to do this? My brother's DNA test doesn't tell me. It doesn't tell me how to relate to this information.

The test just says “26 percent Spain.” But what does “Spain” mean? The territory that we now know as Spain was previously known as al-Andalus when it was ruled by Muslims



**If we want
injustice
in the world
to die, parts
of us have
to die too.**

for centuries, and by other names when it was ruled by the Visigoths and the Roman Empire before that. During the medieval period, southern Spain was a site of great cultural exchange. Christians. Jews. Muslims. Europeans. North Africans. Arabs. Without figures such as Córdoba's Ibn Rushd (Averroes), the Christian West might have never recovered Aristotle's writings and Thomas Aquinas might have lacked a large chunk of his inspiration.

But we're often stuck with the white-washed history of Spain, from the vantage point of the Christian Reconquista, the conquest of Muslim Iberia led by Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II and Isabella. In January, I traveled to southern Spain for the first time and saw this complicated legacy on display. The city of Córdoba has a Catholic cathedral that is built into a mosque, which itself was built on top of a Visigothic basilica. From one spot I could see faded early Christian mosaics; bold, red, double horseshoe arches; elaborate geometric patterns; and Arabic calligraphy. It's a beautiful site, but it's also the exception.

After the Reconquista, most churches ended up like the Gothic cathedral of Sevilla, which was built to completely replace the mosque that came before. Sevilla's cathedral is an imposing structure. I lost my breath as I climbed steps for what seemed like half an hour to get to the top of the cathedral's tower. As I walked on the ground floor, through what felt like six churches in one, I noticed the site where Christopher Columbus is allegedly buried. Both Spain and the Dominican Republic claim to have his remains. In 2006, Spanish researchers announced that a DNA test proved that Columbus was in Sevilla; Dominicans dismissed the findings and argued that they had the real body of Columbus. Either way, the casket I saw played into a narrative. This Gothic cathedral, the biggest in the world, was meant to tell a new story, even if the remaining orange tree courtyard continues to betray its intentions of purity.

The Reconquista culminated in 1492 with the final defeat of the Moors in Granada and with the official expulsion of unconverted Jews. In the emerging nation of Spain, remaining Jews and Muslims were either killed or forcibly converted. And even after conversion, there was an extreme anxiety about whether the conversions were genuine. Known as *conversos* and *moriscos*, Jewish and Muslim converts to the Catholic faith were deemed suspicious. The Spanish Inquisition emerged to purify Spain of these foreign influences, and any former Jews or Muslims suspected of "lapsing in the faith" were put to the death.

In this process, the Spanish obsession with religious purity spilled over into an obsession with a purity of blood, a purity of descent. Conversion wasn't enough. One needed to prove pure Christian descent,



**Whiteness is
a fiction that
will go down
in flames,
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another.**

which meant pure European, non-Jewish descent.

Spain was, arguably, the first modern nation that believed itself to be white. It believed itself to be white and violently made it so. Christian supremacy gave way to purity of blood. The history of Spain itself seems to be a projection of identity.

When a DNA test says “26 percent Spain,” what does “Spain” mean? The test can’t say. It can’t say because DNA tests are inconclusive when it comes to proving identity. They’re inconclusive because they provide information that still needs to be interpreted.

Nevertheless, I can understand why individuals latch onto such information, however inconclusive it may be. Colorful graphs, dotted maps, and percentage pies provide some solace in what is otherwise a cold, nebulous search for meaning. Something as fluid as identity is given back to us, quantified, with metrics. We want to understand who we are. We’re looking for anything that can help. One test. Anything. Some type of sign.

These struggles of deciphering identity make me think about Jesus and the moment that his identity was made absolutely clear.

THE REAL AND THE COUNTERFEIT

According to the gospels, Jesus is baptized. In seminary, I learned that historical Jesus scholars disagree on virtually everything about the life of Jesus except for a few things. This is one of those few things. Almost all agree that Jesus was, in fact, baptized by a man named John. Why? Because in the ancient context, this was the kind of embarrassing fact that a religious group would not invent about their leader, their divine figure. Why would God need to go through a purity ritual? Why would God need to be told who they are? This is the scandal of the Incarnation. God in human flesh. The life of Jesus is about showing us what it truly means to be human.

Before Jesus enters public ministry, before he declares that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to proclaim good news to the poor, Jesus is baptized. Before Jesus engages in any activism, God calls him “beloved.” Before Jesus’ prophetic activity sweeps across the land, this identity is tested. Jesus’ baptism reminds us that before we go out, before we act, before we change the world, we must change ourselves.

Jesus’ mission begins with a humble cleansing. A voice from heaven tells him who he really is. The Christian contemplative tradition describes this dynamic as the true self vs. the false self. We all have a true self that is one with the love of God. But we all are also shadowed by false selves that want to exist outside of this reality. In *Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton writes: “The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. ... Therefore there is only

one problem on which all my existence, my peace, and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find God, I will find myself, and if I find my true self I will find God.”

The baptism that is greater than John’s goes to the very core of who we are. As the text says, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17). The winnowing fork and threshing floor refers to the site of our souls. The wheat is our true self; the chaff is our false self. The process of separating these can be painful.

The text continues: “And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” The true self is relational, is greatly loved, is inherently pleasing. The true self is peaceful and does not build itself through domination of others. The false self is violent and formed through domination. The false self eschews relationality and pretends to be utterly independent. The false self is hatred, is internalized self-hatred, is a child of God vandalized. The false self is always depleted, in need of greater approval, greater success, greater results.

Jesus’ baptism points to the inward reality that we struggle with every day, for our entire lives: realizing who we really are. Realizing who we are not. Spotting the dangerous counterfeits.

To change the world, you must change yourself. What this platitude entails is actually scary. If we want injustice in the world to die, parts of us have to die too.

LETTING GO OF THE LIES

Lately, I have been struck by the meditations of Howard Thurman, a mystic who lived at the height of Jim Crow America. His central concern was this: What does the religion of Jesus have to say to those with their backs against the wall? Although he supported civil rights activists and influenced major figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Thurman emphasized the importance of the inward life to help people live in the present with dignity. I come away from reading him with a sense of freedom. In a world with such heartless conditions, there is still so much I can do.

This message runs counter to the lie that some of us internalize. The lie that presents us as powerless, helpless, voiceless. The tension is how to be honest about our suffering without being reduced to it.

Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa wrote about the U.S.-Mexico border as an open wound. But her radical spirituality also compelled her to look deeper. The border exists within us, within how we see others and see ourselves. Liberation begins with defining the self. In her book *Borderlands*, she writes: “I seek an exoneration, a seeing through the

fictions of white supremacy, a seeing of ourselves in our true guises and not as the false racial personality that has been given to us and that we have given to ourselves.”

What is white supremacy but a systemic false self? It is violent, formed through domination, defaces children of God, and exhibits great fragility through it all. Whiteness is a false self that has formed all of us. But it’s unsustainable. It’s chaff that God will burn, hubris that will burn down the planet.

Whiteness is a fiction that will go down in flames, one way or another.

In the gospel passage, the voice from heaven tells Jesus that he is beloved not because that’s what God needs to hear. It’s what we need to hear. “Beloved” is the true self that the powers and principalities of this world write countless fictions against.

One of the strongest scenes to ever capture this truth is found in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. The character of Baby Suggs preaches a kind of sermon and officiates a kind of baptism for a group of people that recently escaped slavery. In a place called “the clearing,” she reintroduces men, women, and children to their own flesh as something to love.

DNA tests can be meaningful, especially when combined with genealogy. They can teach us about family and ancestors. They can correct false stories. When histories of forced separations lead to dead ends, they can provide small clues about what’s on the other side.

But a test can’t get you to love the *you* that is the culmination of this entire legacy. That requires a type of baptism.

Our own work to build beloved community must begin here, where Jesus begins, grounded in the true beloved self. And what these mystics understand, perhaps better than some others, is that this work takes on a bodily form. Finding our true self is not some purely disembodied act of contemplation. It involves seeing through the lies that have attached themselves to our skin, the fictions that others have written—and sometimes we ourselves have written—onto our bodies.

I don’t know about you, but the skies have never parted for me with a voice telling me I’m beloved. I’ve never found that one indisputable sign that proves my identity. But my grandmother, who is 100 years old and doesn’t remember much, still recognizes my name and smiles when she realizes who I am.

And maybe these are small signs that add up to something, if I observe.

I’m afraid what makes the search for our true self difficult is that it won’t always be pleasant. It’ll be like separating us from the versions of us we are addicted to. It’ll be like finding ourselves with our backs on the threshing floor. ♦

Daniel José Camacho is an associate web editor at *Sojourners*.

L E T

BY JENNA BARNETT

*Church sexual abuse is too often shrouded in secrecy. But **REV. HEIDI HANKEL** and her congregation refused to let it stay hidden.*

During Rev. Heidi Hankel's interview for the lead pastor position at Philadelphia's Bethesda Presbyterian Church, she learned that one of the church's deacons was under investigation by law enforcement for allegedly sexually abusing a member of the youth group. Hankel was later offered the job.

No one would blame even the bravest of pastors for turning it down, but fortunately for that small Presbyterian church, Hankel is a reverend who likes to hop down in the trenches to be with her parishioners. She was afraid, she said, but also propelled by her faith to address the violence openly and holistically. She took the job.

"I didn't know if they would fire me," said Hankel. "But I felt at least I could stand before God one day and say I handled this well."

Hankel had a simple answer for why it is so important for church leaders to loudly and actively work to prevent and address abuse: "God isn't silent. And if God isn't silent, we as his body—his hands and feet—should not be silent."

During the past couple of years, silence has given way to a chorus of abuse accusations against Christian leaders across the country: More than 300 priests in Pennsylvania, 100-plus Southern Baptist youth pastors in Texas, a handful of megachurch pastors across the country. While Christians have grieved these revelations of violence, those in leadership have often prioritized the perpetrators over the victims—the reputation of the church over its mission. In summer 2018, reports emerged that the then-president of a prominent Southern Baptist Convention seminary, Paige Patterson, had counseled abuse victims to stay with their violent husbands, once advising a survivor of rape to forgive the assailant instead of reporting the violence. In response, the seminary thanked Patterson for his longstanding commitment to the SBC and appointed him president emeritus—with compensation. (A week later, after an outcry, the seminary board stripped him of that title and of all "benefits, rights, and privileges.")



B E

PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLIN LENTON

T H E R E



L I G H T

TRANSPARENCY ISN'T EASY

Before Hankel was hired, the pastor and appointed lay leaders of Bethesda Presbyterian had already taken a few important steps to support the victim. First, they ensured separation of the perpetrator and the victim, though this was made easy when the perpetrator submitted a formal letter of membership resignation. The church offered to pay for professional counseling for the victim and the victim's family, which Hankel considers an important form of reparations in sexual abuse situations. And they informed the denominational leadership.

Around the time that Hankel began her position as head pastor, law enforcement's investigation closed, with the abuser accepting a plea deal. Until that point the abuse had been kept confidential within the church's leadership team. But after talking with the victim and the family, Hankel decided that members of the church needed to know what had happened. Without disclosing the victim's identity or gender, Hankel called a congregational meeting to tell them how the church failed and the specific steps they would take to try to ensure no one was ever victimized again.

That was precisely the moment when Bethesda Presbyterian distinguished itself from other churches: Where other churches have tried to cover up this type of violence, relocate the perpetrator, or dismiss a leader without explanation, this small church insisted on pulling back the curtains on the abuse to bring it fully into the light. That kind of light leaves no room for ambiguity about God's preferential favor to the vulnerable and abused. It is an Ephesians 5 kind of light: "for while it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly, everything exposed by the light becomes visible, and everything that becomes visible is light."

Such transparency isn't easy. "I will never forget the look on the faces in the congregation, the deep grief," Hankel said, remembering the day she told them about the deacon's actions. "The place that they treasure, that they love, has become a place of trauma for someone so vulnerable."

WAS DAVID REDEEMED?

Not a single person withdrew their membership that day. Nor would anyone leave when Hankel began an eight-week sermon series on abuse, using King David as the entry point. David, she explained to me, is "this guy after God's own heart," but he has committed "an incredible depth of sin." He rapes Bathsheba, then murders her husband after impregnating her. Two chapters later, David's son Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar and David, her father, remains silent on the matter.

"God is so vocal about abuse and rape," said Hankel. She cited the prophet Nathan's rebuke of David in 2 Samuel 12 ("Why have

you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites"). "I don't think you get it any clearer."

In one of Hankel's sermons from this series, she points out that David, shamed by Nathan's harsh words against him, confessed to sinning against God. But he failed to acknowledge his sin *against Bathsheba*, the victim and the survivor who would become queen, who Matthew would include in his lineage of Jesus, and who would become the mother of King Solomon.

"Do you think David was ever redeemed?" I asked Hankel. She laughed, "I'm probably not the one you want to ask."



She was exactly who I wanted to ask. Hankel is a survivor of childhood sexual violence in a church setting, now leading a congregation to face and redeem the abuse that occurred under their own sacred roof.

"Personally, I still struggle with David," she said. "I have a hard time calling him 'the great King David,' 'the man after God's own heart.' I say it very sarcastically, as you can hear in my tone. Even when David hears Nathan's rebuke, he only half-repents."

The broader church has received an earful of "half-repentances" from powerful faith leaders over the past year. From the defrocked Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, under investigation for sexual abuse: "While I have absolutely no recollection of this reported abuse, and believe in my innocence, I am

sorry for the pain the person who brought the charges has gone through.”

And from Bill Hybels, the former pastor of the prominent evangelical megachurch Willow Creek, accused of several accounts of sexual misconduct: “I realize now that in certain settings and circumstances in the past I communicated things that were perceived in ways I did not intend, at times making people feel uncomfortable.”

These read less like genuine statements of repentance and more like press statements of self-preservation.

JESUS IS A SURVIVOR

I learned from Hankel that there are no short-cuts in repentance. True repentance, she explained, requires that a person fully acknowledge that what they did hurt someone else and damaged their own relationship with God. And then it requires change. Bethesda Presbyterian installed windows in all their doors except the restrooms. The congregation collectively decided that two adults—rather than just one—would accompany the youth at all times. And they acknowledged they didn’t have to figure this out all on their own.

There are a number of organizations and resources available to equip churches to respond and prepare for these types of situations, including Faith Trust Institute, Northwest Family Life, and the “Healing the Wounds of Trauma” course offered by

marginalization. I don’t blame them.”

Tchividjian is unabashed in his insistence that the church has continually failed to prioritize survivors and lead with transparency. “Are we willing to expose our own failures in order to identify those who are hurting people and to demonstrate repentance to those who have been hurt?”

I asked if this work has changed him, and he spoke of a new personal depth for empathy and compassion. He told me that he now has more theological questions and has lost his taste for any answers dressed in absolutes. But still, Tchividjian said, he is hopeful. Mainly because of Jesus, who he considers to be “the most outspoken child advocate of his time.”

Hankel also believes that Jesus is uniquely equipped to minister to survivors. After all, he is one.

“There really isn’t much that [Jesus] doesn’t endure or doesn’t know about our human experience,” she explained, referencing the passion narrative. “He’s stripped naked, he’s beaten, he’s mobbed, he’s publicly tortured, publicly abused. People do not listen to him. They don’t want the rest of the population to hear what he has to say. They’re afraid it’s going to stir up discontent and conflict. We see the same current problem that we’re seeing with sexual abuse happen to our savior.”

But abuse isn’t the end of the story. “Every scar, every moment of that abuse is redeemed

that has already happened in our sacred spaces. We will need to lament and confess while simultaneously working to better ourselves and our protocols to diminish the frequency of this type of violence.

It will require prioritizing those who have been victimized, while ministering to both survivors and perpetrators. Hankel explained to me that ministering to survivors means listening to and believing them. Ministering to perpetrators must be done carefully. Faith leaders can help them see and acknowledge the truth of their sin and its impact. “It is a merciful and graceful and loving step to separate the perpetrator from the thing by which they are enticed,” Hankel said, insisting that ministry to someone who has committed violence against women or children should be done by men and away from the site of the abuse. “We don’t put alcoholics in a bar to do ministry. We don’t put perpetrators around the thing that entices them.”

Full redemption would also look like every seminary training their students how to respond to sexual and domestic violence. The 2018 Broken Silence 2.0 Survey, commissioned by IMA World Health and Sojourners on behalf of the We Will Speak Out coalition, revealed that even though 90 percent of pastors encounter domestic or sexual violence situations through their ministry, only 50 percent feel equipped to respond well. Now that #ChurchToo has shown us the pervasiveness of this violence, said Hankel, churches cannot “just wing it. And you can’t just say ‘This won’t happen to us.’”

After Hankel told her congregation about the abuse that happened in their church, members responded in various ways. Some didn’t want to believe that the deacon they respected could be capable of this darkness. Others opened up to Hankel for the first time about the violence they endured in their lifetimes. And the church changed. They have become “more protective and caring,” she said, “a center for hope and healing.”

Once you see the scriptures through a lens of abuse, Hankel told me, you can’t unsee it. This lens makes us cautious to use biblical phrases such as “turn the other cheek” and further complicates traditionally venerated biblical figures—even the “great King David.”

When we preach or write or offer counsel, this lens prompts us to ask ourselves, *Would these words be healing and empowering to a person facing violence?* And this lens changes the way we see Jesus: publicly abused, but wholly liberated. And if this is how we see Christianity’s central figure, how might we re-center the vulnerable at every level of the church? ♦

JESUS IS UNIQUELY EQUIPPED TO MINISTER TO SURVIVORS. AFTER ALL, HE IS ONE.

the American Bible Society. Bethesda Presbyterian called Boz Tchividjian of Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE), a nonprofit organization that empowers and trains Christian communities to recognize, prevent, and respond to abuse.

Tchividjian, a grandson of Billy Graham and a lawyer, started GRACE after prosecuting several hundred sexual abuse and sexual assault cases for the state of Florida. He noticed that churches rarely responded in a way that prioritized the victim, and he wanted to help change that.

“So many people who had been wounded in the church fled from it,” he said. “They didn’t see it as a place of healing and refuge. They saw the church as a place of pain and sorrow and hopelessness and, oftentimes,

in some way in the belief in the resurrection,” Hankel said, before seamlessly beginning to address survivors directly as she spoke with me, a shift I noticed in many of her sermons as well.

“God [through Jesus] experienced what you experienced, and he was not believed. He was chased out. He was pushed away. You are not alone. Your God and your savior has experienced this too and is still with you.”

A CHANGED CONGREGATION

Since my conversations with Hankel and Tchividjian, I’ve been wondering what it would look like for the church to fully repent of our sins of abuse. Following the model of Bethesda Presbyterian, it might look like a continued and transparent unearthing of the violence

Jenna Barnett is an associate web editor at Sojourners.

T H E

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HOPE

OFFERS A WAY

TO KEEP FEAR FROM

OVERPOWERING US.

BY WALTER
BRUEGGEMANN



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→ WHEN WE ARE CONTAINED in the world that is immediately in front of us, we will inescapably end in despair. The inventory of despair-producers is well known: The failure of public institutions; the collapse of moral consensus; the failure of political nerve; growing economic inequity; and the pervasiveness of top-down violence against the vulnerable.

The good news of the gospel is that we need not be contained within that immediate world, and “hoppers” refuse to be so contained: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

That chapter in the Bible provides a roster of Jewish hoppers who refused resignation to what was in front of them. What these hoppers have in common is that they knew and trusted that God’s alternative world is crowding in on the dominant world of despair and will—soon or late—overcome it. The good world of God’s promise is marked by restorative justice, compassion, and mercy. Hoppers who trust in this coming world refuse despair, trust the promises of God, and actively engage in the performance of that new world.

Against such resolve, despair has no chance in the long run! God’s peculiar hope is reliable ground for not allowing the fears of the present to define or overpower us.

HERE ARE

10

DIMENSIONS

OF HOPE

AS AFFIRMED

IN THE BIBLE.

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→ **HOPE DEPENDS SOLELY ON GOD AND ON GOD’S FAITHFUL FREEDOM.** As it is affirmed in the great hymn of John Calvin: “Our hope is in no other save in thee; our faith is built upon thy promise free.”

Only God! Not our ideologies, pet projects, or our deep biases. But then we must be clear on who God is. The God of the Bible is not a First Cause or an Unmoved Mover or even the Ground of Being. Rather the God witnessed there is a real character who plays an active role in the life of the world. This God, moreover, is a lively agent who has purposes and resolves, who will and does enact those purposes with active, effective verbs.

This God, moreover, is characterized by faithfulness. This is a God who does not quit but who persists in said purposes through thick and thin. But this divine faithfulness is not automatic. Rather God’s faithfulness is exercised in freedom, not limited to the reality of the world, not boxed in by ideology, not confined by our “laws” of reality.

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IT IS UNTHINKABLE
THAT GOD WOULD CREATE A
WORLD MARKED BY INJUSTICE,
BRUTALITY, ALIENATION, OR
VIOLENCE.

W

→ **IN FREE FAITHFULNESS GOD MAKES PROMISES ABOUT A FUTURE WORLD ARRANGEMENT CONGRUENT WITH GOD’S OWN PERSON.** We know about God’s own person because God has, in the Bible, disclosed God’s own self. This is a God marked by relational qualities of constancy for which the preferred biblical terms are “justice, righteousness, faithfulness, steadfast love, and mercy” (see Exodus 34:6-7, Hosea 2:19-20, Lamentations 3:22-23). This is who God is. For that reason this is what God wants and to which God is committed for the future.

As a result, the Bible witnesses to this God making promises about a future that will be decisively marked by well-being in terms of the relational marks of “justice, righteousness, faithfulness, steadfast love, and mercy.” It is not thinkable that God would be at work creating a world that is marked by injustice, brutality, alienation, or violence. Where such social circumstances emerge, we may be sure that they contradict God’s intention for the world. Thus in Ezekiel 34 God is said to chastise the powerful for being exploitative and self-serving. In response to that sorry circumstance, God resolves to act alternatively in the world (see Ezekiel 34:15-16). God undertakes the work of restoration, the very work of restoration we see in the ministry of Jesus.

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GOD'S PROMISES DO NOT DEPEND ON OPTIMISTIC CIRCUM- STANCE BUT ONLY UPON THE RESOLVE OF GOD.

→ **GOD'S PROMISES WELL UP POWERFULLY IN CONTEXTS OF URGENT NEED, DEFYING DESPAIR AND MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY.** We may easily identify three historical crises in the Bible, each of which is marked by despair into which God's promises come as an alternative future. First, in Genesis, Abraham and Sarah are without an heir and so with no future (11:30). In that circumstance God declares, against all biological odds, that an heir will be given that will open a future for this chosen family (18:10-14).

Second, in the Babylonian exile the displacement seemed to be a dead end for the Jews. In that context of despair, there is an explosion of prophetic promises that assert a new future beyond Babylonian control (Isaiah 40-55, Jeremiah 30-33, Ezekiel 33-37). Third, in Luke 1:46-56, Mary sings a song of defiance against the predatory economy and anticipates that Jesus will enact a new social life that restores economic viability to the left-behind. No explanation is offered for any of these promises; there is only anticipation. God's promises do not depend on optimistic circumstance but only upon the resolve of God. Hope is trust in the promises against the evidence of circumstance.

F O
U R

→ **GOD'S PROMISES CHARACTERISTICALLY CONCERN SOCIAL, BODILY, THIS-WORLDLY WELL-BEING, THE EMERGENCE OF A VIABLE NEIGHBORHOOD.** There is nothing like "generic religion" to distort our understanding of biblical hope. In generic religion ("thoughts and prayers"!) it is supposed that "faith" concerns the well-being of our "souls" and that we are at best headed for "heaven" as a land of eternity. None of that, however, is central to biblical hope. Indeed, biblical hope contradicts all of that popular assumption. Instead the promises of God speak of the "kingdom of God," which means the world arranged according to the purposes of God. That is why we pray that God's kingdom will come "on earth as it is in heaven."

That promised coming arrangement of the world is:

- **SOCIAL:** it concerns the common good of the community and all creatures.
- **BODILY:** it concerns the material security and viability of all creatures, notably the vulnerable, left-behind, lame, blind, and poor.
- **THIS-WORLDLY:** that is, the daily life of folk here and now, not a never-never land of "souls."

A social community organized by God's hope is indeed a neighborhood in which all of the neighbors are bound in common well-being.

F I V E

→ **GOD FULFILLS GOD'S PROMISES IN TWO MODES, BOTH DIRECTLY AND INDIRECTLY.** Indirectly God fulfills promises by summoning, empowering, and dispatching human agents to act out God's futures for neighborliness. Thus, in the prophetic tradition (that for Christians culminates in Jesus), God is known to call human persons to do the work of neighborly justice. Alternatively, in the apocalyptic tradition (also arriving at Jesus), the issues are too large and demanding to be enacted by human agents. In such circumstances God is seen to act directly and dramatically to end what is old and failed, and to initiate new creaturely possibility.

It is likely that many people committed to social justice would opt for the indirect mode, because we understand ourselves to be part of that called company dispatched to enact God's future. It is, however, not an either/or. In biblical faith it is a both/and, both indirect and direct, as evidenced in the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions. When we are affluent and intellectually sophisticated, we will likely see that God acts through human agents. When we are desperate, we are more likely to hope and pray for God to act directly. In both modes, it is affirmed that new possibilities are underway through God's faithfulness.

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SIX

→ **HOPE IS THE UNBLINKING CONVICTION THAT GOD'S PROMISES ARE RELENTLESSLY UNDERWAY TOWARD FULFILLMENT.** God's promises contradict much of the way the world is, because much of the world is out of sync with God's purposes. Hope is the conviction that this out-of-sync world will not last and cannot finally refuse God's intent. Hebrews 11 offers a great articulation of hope; that inventory of hopers shows that the biblical tradition consists in those who have lived according to God's promises. Their names are legion, consisting in "prophets and apostles, saints and martyrs." For all of them, faith is "the conviction of things not seen" (11:1).

What we see in the world is quite otherwise. For Abraham saw barrenness; for Moses it was bondage. For Samuel it was the Philistines. For those addressed in Hebrews 11, it was the brutality of the Roman Empire. For us now it is variously the predatory economy that systemically excludes more and more people as "left-behind," or it is a diminished environment that will not be sustained. The news is that this world will not finally stand as it is. We belong to the company of those who have not blinked!

HOPE IS THE REFUSAL TO
LET OUR LIVES BE DEFINED
BY THAT PRESENT WORLD
ARRANGEMENT.

SEVEN

→ **HOPE IN GOD'S PROMISES IS NOT PASSIVE BUT DEMANDINGLY ACTIVE; IT IS A RESOLVE TO LIVE IN GOD'S FUTURE AS THOUGH IT WERE ALREADY HERE.** Hope is not optimism or a wish or a good idea. It is a way of living differently in the world. Jesus declared that "the kingdom of God has come near" (or "is at hand," Mark 1:15). As anyone can see, it is not here yet. But it is about to be. It is always about to be, always "almost."

Jesus summoned those who became his disciples to live differently, as though the new kingdom arrangement were already in effect, and so to live in contradiction to the way the world seems to be. We are not under any illusion. We can see how the world is. But hope is the refusal to let our lives be defined by that present world arrangement. Thus:

- **WE REFUSE** the exclusionary practices and policies of the present world, and enact hospitality that is a mark of the new kingdom.
- **WE REFUSE** the fearful parsimony of the present world, and enact generosity that is a mark of the coming world.
- **WE REFUSE** the thirst for vengeance that is all around us, and enact forgiveness that is a mark of the coming kingdom of God.

Hope is spirit-led imagination that refuses what we can see for the sake of what is as sure as God's faithfulness.

E I G H T

→ **HOPE IS INESCAPABLY INCONVENIENT AND EVENTUALLY DANGEROUS.** Because hope contradicts the present world, it is inconvenient. Thus Abraham had to depart his home country to receive God's promise. The first disciples of Jesus "left everything" to follow. The hoppers of faith have understood that God's newness disrupts a comfortable life. That newness summons us out of our comfort zone to be with folk we might not prefer, doing tasks and taking risks we might not easily choose.

Soon or late, hope brings us into conflict with the forceful powers that defend the status quo—that will go to great violent ends to protect that status quo. Thus Moses finally had to confront Pharaoh. Esther risked her life to confront the king. Jesus had to face the violent power of Rome. And we know about Bonhoeffer and King, Romero and the missionaries killed in El Salvador, and so many others. Most of us will not go so far as such danger. All of us, however, are invited to the inconvenience of God's newness. And once we go there, who knows what risks may follow?

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→ **HOPE IS THE EMANCIPATORY ALTERNATIVE TO RESIGNATION, DESPAIR, OR SELF-SUFFICIENCY.** A world out of sync is demanding and fatiguing. It requires a great deal to live in long-term alienation. When we are fully aware of our present world, we may indeed settle for resignation, believing that it will always be this way. When we inhale resignation long enough, we may end in despair, because the present world arrangement cannot and will not generate anything genuinely new. Or if we are able we may be propelled to self-sufficiency, believing that if we hustle and are smart enough, we can make ourselves okay in this costly world.

So imagine us—almost all of us—variously caught in resignation, despair, or self-sufficiency. These however, are all less than satisfying traps, for we are not, in our God-given creatureliness, intended to live this way. Hope is a refusal of resignation because we know about God's newness. Hope is a rejection of despair, because God has made and keeps promises. Hope is a liberation from self-sufficiency, because we are able to live by God's generosity. Hope is a transformative alternative to what is on offer by our weary world.

→ **HOPE IS THE GROUND FOR COURAGE, FREEDOM, AND JOY.** The present world arrangement is governed by fear and imagined fear. We know, moreover, that perfect fear casts out love. It also casts out courage, freedom, and joy. Perfect fear casts out all of the qualities and practices of our best humanness. We are led then to ask about an effective antidote to fear that so diminishes us.

Hope is reliable ground for not allowing the fears of the present to define or overpower us. Hope refuses fear because we know that God's good future is surely coming that will displace all present threats. As we live into that sure future, present fears lose their authority over us.

As a consequence, those who hope find the courage—which fear has robbed us of—to act against the expectations of the present. Those who hope find freedom to enact agency for our lives and the lives of our neighbors, freedom that has cowered before fear. Those who hope find joy that is impossible when we are paralyzed by fear. We are in the company of the unafraid, full of courage, freedom, and joy. ✱

Walter Brueggemann, a *Sojourners* contributing editor, is professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga.



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Dance



B

Black ballerinas have long perfected the art of altering pink tights and ballet shoes to match their skin tones. The night before a class with company members of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the first black classical ballet company, pots of water with

multiple tea bags boiled on the stove in my home, so I could dye my legwear and footwear. It was a process my mother swore by—and it worked.

In November 2018, nearly 200 years after pink ballet shoes were designed for white dancers, the company Freed of London released pointe shoes in colors that match Asian and black skin tones. It's a step in the right direction, even though the ballet world continues to be characterized by whiteness.

Lauren Anderson, the first black principal ballerina of the Houston Ballet and the first African American to reach the rank of principal dancer in the company, transcends the bounds of the often exclusive world of classical dance. Her brown pointe shoes are on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. She is a ballerina, a mother, and a teacher. "I get paid to do what I love," she says gratefully. She is also a Christian.

I know this not just because our conversation is studded with words such as "church" and "God," but because of the

way Anderson talks about her life and how it fits into a larger context. She has a sense that she is positioned exactly where God wants her to be. She has a strong relationship with the Link School of the Arts in Michigan, a Christian dance school where she has taught, directed, and choreographed for nearly a decade.

Anderson is also the founder of the Holy Spirit Dancers, a dance ministry at her church. Her voice fills with pride as she describes to me how one of her now-college-age dancers has taken on the leadership of the dance ministry in her absence.

"I wouldn't change a thing," she says, reflecting on the trajectory of her life: marriage, divorce, firsts and milestones, moments close to God and moments far away from God, and, of course, her beautiful son. "I thought my purpose in life was to be a ballerina," she says. "That ain't have nothing to do with it!" At age 53, she sees her intent: giving back to her community and loving others.

As we talk, she sits in her office at the Houston Ballet, where she manages 17 unique outreach programs. In addition to overseeing those programs, she teaches students in the Houston Ballet's Learning from the Masters program.

But for her, this isn't enough activity. She also teaches at conservatories in Houston and across the country.

When Anderson was 9, she saw company members of the Dance Theatre of Harlem perform at Jones Hall in downtown Houston. She watched the legend Virginia Johnson, an African-American woman active in the dance world during the civil rights movement, move onstage. "I think when I went to that performance," says Anderson, "it changed my life."

Decades later, the Grammy-winning singer-songwriter Solange witnessed Anderson—then a principal dancer with the Houston Ballet—"glissade across the stage," to quote *T Magazine*. Solange says it was a defining moment for her own artistic journey.

Today, the Holy Spirit Dancers at Anderson's church, the young dancers at the conservatories where she teaches, and the children in the Houston Ballet programs she oversees are firsthand witnesses of a shift in classical ballet history, in *American* history. They can laugh with, talk with, listen to, and learn from that change. And what a gift that is.

**"I THOUGHT MY
PURPOSE IN LIFE WAS
TO BE A BALLERINA.
THAT AIN'T HAVE
NOTHING TO DO
WITH IT."**

Ronya-Lee Anderson (no relation to Lauren) is a multimedia artist and educator and a graduate of Duke Divinity School.



Spike Lee

WHAT WE CHOOSE

By Abby Olcese

"Always do the right thing."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"I got it. I'm gone."

Da Mayor (Ossie Davis) and Mookie (Spike Lee) share this exchange in Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*, which turns 30 this summer. Three decades on, Lee's masterpiece on racism and community still stands out for its trailblazing voice. Lee, and the film that blasted him into broad public consciousness, continue to inspire powerful work by filmmakers of color, including *Dear White People*, *Get Out*, and *The Hate U Give*.

It's undeniable that *Do the Right Thing*'s bold style and perspective are what helped it become iconic. Its depiction of the police killing of black men also remains powerful and, as it turned out, prescient. The film almost seems to have predicted events that unfolded 25 years later following the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and so many others.

However, the emotional motor of Lee's film, what makes it really stand apart, lies in Da Mayor's simple moral instruction—and Mookie's dismissiveness of it.

Do the Right Thing covers a sweltering summer day in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood and the conflicts that arise between its residents. Those involved include Davis' alcoholic elder statesman, Mookie, Mookie's friends Buggin Out (Giancarlo Esposito) and Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), and the pizzeria owner, Sal (Danny Aiello). Aggression simmers between characters of different races and age groups, eventually coming to a head in an explosion of violence that escalates into a riot.

Throughout *Do the Right Thing*'s episodic scenes, characters are given choices of how to behave, choices that recall the kind of radical compassion Paul preaches in Ephesians 4:31-32: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger

and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

This is what Da Mayor is talking about when he tells Mookie to "do the right thing." However, in almost every situation, Lee's characters choose to dismiss compassion. Instead, they give into instincts that generate tension, injustice, and, ultimately, the destruction of a community.

What makes *Do the Right Thing* so unique is that it contains no monolithic examples of racism or hatred. Lee shows us characters (white and people of color alike) who fail to see each other as complex human beings and how that failure generates bigotry.

Lee never excuses, nor directly condemns, any individual in his film. Rather, he tries to help us understand each of his characters' perspectives. *Do the Right Thing* reminds us that we each contain the capacity for both valid and wrongheaded ideas. Being honest with ourselves about that means we can lean toward compassion, justice, and peace. Dismissing it can carry fatal consequences. ♦

Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

AMONG THE BRANCHES

Retro sounds meet recent dangers in the album *Things That Grow*. Backed by Memphis rock musicians, songwriter Tracy Howe sings of liberation from violence, racism, and environmental destruction. Soul and gospel lift her prayerful words and guide listeners forward on the shared "justice road."

Just Love Music



A Heart of Wisdom

A novel about class, masculinity, queerness, violence, race, and the refugee experience—and a son's candid letter to his mother who can't read—*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, by T.S. Eliot Prize-winning poet Ocean Vuong, examines the gifts and wounds that the world gives in unequal measure.

Penguin Press



Holy Recompense

For centuries, the Bible has been used to assault the humanity of people of color. *Unsettling the Word: Biblical Experiments in Decolonization*, a collection of 70 writings on scripture by justice-minded authors, reclaims power and significance stolen from Indigenous communities and other marginalized groups.

Orbis Books

THE POINT OF ART

By
Faith-Marie
Zamblé



Curated

"Artists express things that people don't have words for; that's why it's so important to have them in justice spaces."

With that neat answer, the panelist sits back in her chair, satisfied, bedazzled nails glimmering in the stage lights. I roll my eyes, then immediately feel guilty. You know you're in for a rough night when you find yourself side-eyeing a Tony Award-winning actress—at a Martin Luther King Jr. Day event, no less—but I can't help myself. Her answer smacks of the vague, self-congratulatory art-speak I hear on a regular basis, in which people tell me their work is a "metaphor for capitalism," without any kind of explanation.

To be clear, I often find art-isms amusing and think this particular actress is incredibly talented. And yet, the question of art and its subsequent teleology remains: Why do we have art? What good does it do?

Though the answers to these questions may seem hopelessly obvious to some, they seem hopelessly complex to me—because, since moving to New York City a few months ago, I have seen, well, *everything*.

The famed medieval "Unicorn Tapestries" are hidden in a museum at the top of a steep hill, so I dragged myself up said hill to see them. I've poked my head into snooty galleries, attended plucky DIY exhibitions tucked into bland office buildings, and wandered into an event where dozens of bald CGI women stumbled across a screen while chopped electronica wailed in the background. I've seen murals made out of piñata paper, tree sculptures cut out of McDonald's bags, John Singer Sargent paintings, Gustav Klimt paintings, neo-Renaissance paintings of candy-colored cherubs, and paintings of Donald Trump with the words "malignant narcissist" lurking next to his silhouette. I've seen a lifetime's worth of Founding Father portraits.

Cultural overwhelm triggered an existential reckoning within me. I find myself asking what the point of all these works of art was, especially in a political time where so much of life feels urgent and frightening.

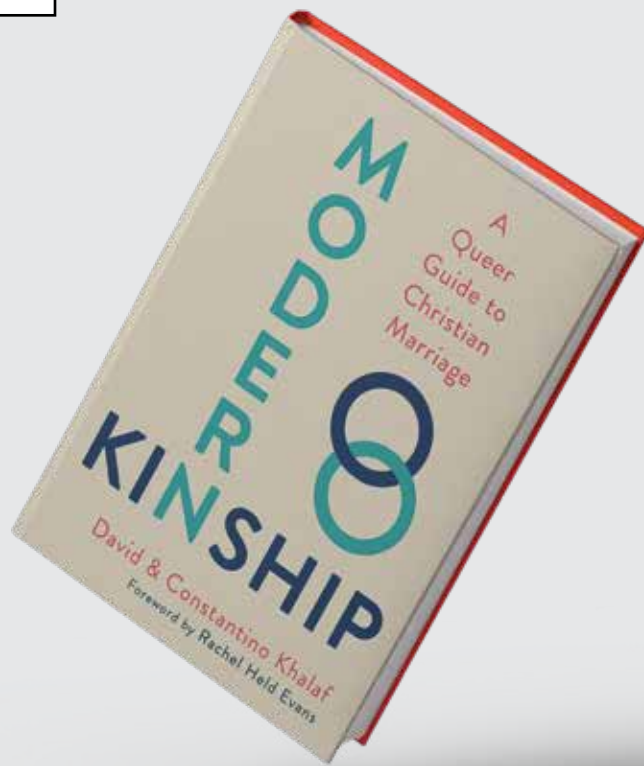
A common response might be that art can exist as a tool for justice amid societal turbulence. This, while true, seems to miss the point of art more broadly. Art can address inequality, but if that's all it does, it loses the qualities that make it poignant: its infinite capacity to delight, surprise, inspire, and imagine worlds completely outside of our own.

The conclusion I've come to, with the help of Audre Lorde's wonderful essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," is that the end result, i.e. the art object, is not the only thing that matters. The impetus to create, to translate one's experience to others, is in itself a political and spiritual act: I would say holy, even. That impulse, of loving consideration amid vast nothingness, mirrors the hovering of the Holy Spirit in Genesis before the formation of the world.

I don't mean to suggest that all artists are prophets or priests; obviously, artists, like most people, are susceptible to the wiles of capitalism, racism, etc. But the creative spirit is not limited by the -isms of the world: Genuine curiosity cannot be commodified or colonized. An eternity exists in the space before the dance begins, before the poet puts pen to paper, before the song is sung, and in that eternity lies freedom and possibility.

This, perhaps, is why we need art. Not necessarily for its politics, but for its freedom to say what others dare not: that what exists is not all there is. ✦

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist and writer in New York City.



WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

Modern Kinship:
A Queer Guide to Christian
Marriage, by David and
Constantino Khalaf

Westminster John Knox Press

The church that baptized me and was my spiritual home does not provide marriage counseling to LGBTQ couples. I doubt it even allows openly LGBTQ people to join its congregation. This treatment isn't unusual: For years, many LGBTQ people have been denied true belonging and dignity in church bodies worldwide. Their romantic partnerships have been damned by clergy and discredited by loved ones. While heterosexual couples have been given pastors' blessings and guidance, many LGBTQ couples have been abandoned to the harshness of life's challenges.

David and Constantino Khalaf know this struggle well and don't want queer Christians interested in finding a partner to have to figure out the complexities of faith, marriage, and commitment on their own. That's why they have bravely

THE KHALAFS PROVIDE LGBTQ CHRISTIANS SUPPORT AND VALIDATION THAT CHURCHES HAVE DENIED FOR YEARS.

written the book *Modern Kinship: A Queer Guide to Christian Marriage*.

I say "bravely" because, in this beautifully public way, they reveal a lot about their private and imperfect lives. From painful memories of reparative therapy and ostracization by relatives to the story of how they found each other after failed relationships and struggled to make it to the altar, the Khalafs share much of their individual and shared histories. Their mistakes and lessons, often conveyed with humor, provide LGBTQ Christians support and validation that churches have denied for years.

The Khalafs could have limited the contents of *Modern Kinship* to just their experiences, but they understand how perspectives of cis men dominate the culture, obscuring the narratives and concerns of others. By including interviews with Christians who are trans, lesbian, and other queer identities—and proclaiming that the church must, in addition to embracing queer marriage, "approach singleness as an equally valid life choice"—the Khalafs recognize the humanity and importance of other lives and expand *Modern Kinship's* impact and truth.

"A good marriage," they write, "is outwardly focused; it carries a mission and seeks to make the world a more loving, peaceful place."

Rarely have I seen so much goodness and potential

attributed to queer Christian marriages; in *Modern Kinship*, these sentiments are as abundant as hand fans in a Southern Baptist church. LGBTQ Christians can open the book and see reflected back the *imago dei* that's within them and the people they care for.

"Queer bodies are worth saving," the Khalafs write, "... be they cis or trans; male, female, neither, or both; curvy, skinny, or muscular; black, brown, white, or any other shade of skin. Sexual ethics matter because we are all worthy of respect, honor, and celebration."

As I read those words for the first time, the ice around my faith—the frost of forlornness I had felt ever since my queerness met my religion—quickly began to melt. Amen, David and Constantino. Amen. ✕

Da'Shawn Mosley is culture and review editor of *Sojourners*.



THE DAMAGE DONE

Grace Will Lead Us Home:
The Charleston Church
Massacre and the Hard, Inspiring
Journey to Forgiveness,
by Jennifer Berry Hawes

St. Martin's Press

A

"And there sat a dark leather-bound Bible soaked in blood. A bullet had pierced its pages."

The Bible belonged to Felicia Sanders, one of the five people to walk out of Mother Emanuel AME Church alive after a stranger who had been welcomed to a Bible study shot and killed Rev. Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Rev. Daniel L. Simmons, Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson.

The quote is from Jennifer Berry Hawes' new book, *Grace Will Lead Us Home: The Charleston Church Massacre and the Hard, Inspiring Journey to Forgiveness*. With measured prose and journalistic excellence, this book rounds out the forgiveness and grace that have become synonymous with the Charleston massacre by exposing the outrage, isolation, and bumpy road of grief that followed the deaths.

This book is also an unexpected study in pastoral care for trauma survivors and their loved ones, and a cautionary

tale for congregations thrust into the national spotlight. Not only did the church suffer a violent trauma, the community lost its core spiritual leadership in one night, and suffered the consequences of that void. A string of poor management of donations, power-hungry pastors, and very little, if any, visitation to the bereaved and survivors also left many with a sense that their beloved church was no longer their spiritual home. Tourists filled the pews while survivors chose to worship elsewhere.

Felicia Sanders' bullet-pierced Bible was professionally cleaned and returned to her: "A pinkish hue tinted the gossamer paper inside." Sanders held it as she spoke to the man who killed her son, Tywanza. "My Bible, abused—abused, torn, shot up. When I look at the Bible, I see the blood that Jesus shed for me. And for you. ... May God have mercy on your soul."

Other family members that day called the killer a "monster" and told him to "burn in hell." While national news celebrated the bond hearing in which forgiveness was spoken to the killer only days after the crime, notes from the sentencing trial reveal that the family members "weren't the homogeneous group of forgiving people the world wanted them to be."

In the four years since the Charleston massacre, there have been more mass shootings and killings in houses of worship and places where violence is least expected, so many that it's hard to take in. *Grace Will Lead Us Home* lends flesh-and-blood details to a community still healing.

May God, indeed, have mercy. ✕

Josina Guess is a freelance writer and worship leader at Jubilee Partners in Comer, Ga.

Above:
Charleston
survivors
Polly Sheppard
(L) and Felicia
Sanders



THE WORLD YET TO BE

Reaching Forever:
Poems, by Philip C. Kolin

Cascade Books



Humanity has been reaching ever since Eve put her hand out and plucked the forbidden fruit. Since then, our acts of extension have been plagued far too often with violence and, in the end, death and despair. Philip Kolin's new book of poetry, *Reaching Forever: Poems*, takes on those stretches and examines them with grace. His book is a fresh take on what it means to be loved and loving.

In the poem "God Comes to the Eternal Gate Holiness Church," Kolin makes short work of people whose reaching is unsuccessful, via one of my favorite lines: "Bystanders down country roads reach out to him." In other words, the spiritual life is not one for spectators but for those who do God's will.

Then Kolin describes Judgment Day: how God makes a grand entrance, more splendidly attired than a rock star or royalty. The God who is life encounters God's people; the divine presence begins the great liturgy, the celebration of celebrations. "Later that evening he will have brought each a rose, and they sigh / *Emmanuel*." This is what only the greatest of beloveds can and will do: Gift each believer with the symbol of passion, thus saying in love's silent language, "You are mine." What a contrast to those whose reach makes them only bystanders!

Kolin writes of another beloved in his poem "Uncle Kenan Praying at Church." Likely every parish church has a least one Kenan sitting in the back pew, unnoticed save in the eyes of God. The old man's prayer of intercession is simple: "he continues to lift each up / for limitless mercy," for the world speaks "with strange voices." Finally, the years have whittled down Kenan's prayer into just waiting for the Lord to come for him.

"But uncertainty is also a catechism," says the poem "Autumnals," which speaks to me with poignant urgency. Like many people, I take notice when I read news that a person died, whether they are young or 71, the age I am approaching.

What can I reach for at my age? I wonder.

Kolin answers my question: "But keep your reflections calm—see a pond / become an opalesque canvas." This is the poet's invitation to see deeply and thus live more deeply during what years are left to us.

While "carpe diem"—seize the day and reach for every opportunity—is wise advice for the young, Kolin's gentle speech of the "world yet to be" is a reminder that the world he describes is beyond our reach. It should be, for it is the greatest of gifts: the final healing of the wound our first parents experienced after their misguided choice. ❁

Lou Ella Hickman, a poet, is a member of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament of Corpus Christi, Texas.

**THE POET INVITES
US TO SEE DEEPLY
AND THUS LIVE
MORE DEEPLY DURING
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LIQUID FAITH

By Richard Schiffman



This seep of droplets sponged by moss leaked
 from a cleft in the rock; the waters in the cleft
 rose osmotically from earth:
 the aquifers of earth rained down
 from cloudburst skies;
 the waters from above were sucked up
 from the seas; the seas were filled
 to overflow by rivers of the land;
 the rivers fed forever by congeries of springs.

These cycles are life flowing,
 no dim and dry surmise.
 The spirit too has cycles that begin with honest thirst.
 Thirst is not a verdict but clear evidence of need.
 Need is inner emptiness that primes the pump
 to pump. Faith is not conjecture, but knowing
 water flows. However parched the season
 or the heart, unseen chambers filling
 drop by drop.

Richard Schiffman is an environmental journalist and poet. His most recent collection of poems is *What the Dust Doesn't Know*.

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DISTRESS THE COMFORTABLE

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle C.

By Kenyatta R. Gilbert



Living the Word

Certain words cause problems. When I ask first-year seminarians to take seriously the importance of using inclusive language for God and humanity, who would have thought my urging would generate such panic and skepticism?

To my suggestion that “Father God” is grammatically (and theologically) on par with “Heavenly Parent” or “Mother God,” I can see in their blank stares and grimaces that they feel, yet again, that the God known to them is being tampered with.

Perhaps the term “inclusion” is difficult for some because it means that all things done in word and deed that do no intentional harm to others are at worst permissible, because God’s love is boundless. Equally fraught is the term “expansion.” Notions of colonialism, manifest destiny, and Christian triumphalism come to mind.

How did the words “inclusive” and “expansion” become problematic, polarizing terms? One might place blame squarely on the shoulders of postmodernity, with its demand that Christians shed their husks of credulity and theological defensiveness. Others argue that for Christians to be taken seriously today, they must join the postmodern conversation with a revelation that can hold up in a world of scientific advancement and Twitter.

In these Pentecost season readings, we are given tools to see how examination of the past informs the present and ushers us into the wide embrace of a loving God who sends believers out to do big things. God invites non-Israelites into wholeness, leads the fainthearted to joy, distresses the comfortable who cooperate with evil, and reassures followers sent out as “lambs before wolves” that the promises of the sender are trustworthy.

Kenyatta R. Gilbert, founding director of The Preaching Project, is professor of homiletics at the Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C. He is author of *A Pursued Justice* and *Exodus Preaching*.

**UNRECOGNIZED ANGELS PERFORM
THEIR HOLY WORK IN THE WORLD.
UNNAMED LIVES MATTER.**

JULY 7

SCENES AND SIGNALS

2 KINGS 5:1-14; PSALM 30; GALATIANS
6:1-16; LUKE 10:1-11, 16-20

Community wellness is a divine concern. God enters and exits the moving scenes of scripture in unsuspecting places and in the acts of unlikely people to signal God’s presence. In 2 Kings, unnamed servants act as divine emissaries who lead the powerful and mighty commander Naaman to shed his cultural arrogance, heed the wise counsel of the prophet Elisha, and confess faith in YHWH. Unnamed actors play pivotal roles in God’s liberative work. We see the divine at work in the voice of the captured Israelite servant girl of Naaman’s wife (2 Kings 5:2), in the desperate appeal of Naaman’s servants (5:13), and in the emboldened testimony of the 70 commissioned evangelists (Luke 10:1) who put demons to flight (verse 17). An all-star cast of anonymous diplomats is pressed into the service of God to ensure that God’s agenda for communal restoration is accomplished. For this reason, it would be unbiblical for anyone to claim that one’s scriptural anonymity would necessarily equal absence of agency.

Each year CNN recognizes culturally anonymous heroes who do life-giving work around the globe. They build wells in drought-stricken areas; they forgo vacations to repair cleft palates; they join Teach for America to aid educationally underserved communities. It is easy to focus our attention on the singular charismatic leader who rallies the troops into action when harm is done to communities of struggle. But we cannot underestimate the generosity of soup-kitchen chefs and environmental engineers who elect to do the work of community repair and maintenance behind the scenes, without fanfare and fuss. In a time rife with political

chaos, it is difficult to remember that at the signal of a beneficent Creator, unrecognized angels have been dispatched to perform their holy work in the world. Unnamed lives matter.

Through scripture's unnamed actors, communal restoration comes in the form of healing leprosy, soul rescue from formidable foes (Psalm 30), gentleness and burden-bearing after transgression (Galatians 6:1-2), and victory over Satan and other principalities that block God's mission to save not only Israel but the entire world (Luke 10:16).

JULY 14

WORLD PROPHET

AMOS 7:7-17; PSALM 82; COLOSSIANS 1:1-14; LUKE 10:25-37

Judgment and mercy are at the heart of God in a world gone awry. The prophet Amos forecasts the death of King Jeroboam and Israel's exile to Babylon as God's punitive judgment for the king's iniquitous behavior (Amos 7:17). The doomsday oracle comes to unwelcoming recipients. No wonder the prophet refuses the designation *nabi* (prophet) and says, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and dresser of sycamore trees" (Amos 7:14). To which God says, Not so fast, buddy! I have an assignment for you, Amos, because you alone can be trusted to report what you see in your age of mass deception. This is the expressed nature of the prophet's duty. And according to Amaziah, "the land is not able to bear all [Amos'] words" (verse 10).

But what if God seems not to be attending to the evident woes in our world, and the divine response to injustice is stalled? The psalmist advises that we not lose hope. Despite what is seen, God rouses in response to our pleas for justice and is poised to do battle for the weak, the orphan, and the destitute because God has taken up residence in the divine council—a residence for judging the nations of the earth (Psalm 82:1-4, 8).

The opposite of judgment is *hesed* (mercy). In Jesus' parable, mercy is epitomized in the actions of a supposed religious heretic, a Samaritan, whom Jesus elevates to sainthood because of his behavior. Jesus teaches the lawyer in the story's front matter that loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength "is all good" but is only the midterm exam. Going out into a world beyond the safety of one's tribe and into the heart of another of a different cultural or religious stripe—that is the final exam. The two other actors in the passage, whom we are expected to believe will be mercy-givers, failed the test due to reticence or unwillingness.

Neighborliness is often found in the

heart of socially disqualified people. Who knows? The social pariah next door may be our window of hope when we are left for dead (Luke 10).

JULY 21

ACT FOR OTHERS

AMOS 8:1-12; PSALM 52; COLOSSIANS 1:15-28; LUKE 10:38-42

Naming our social location is a fundamental first step of truth-telling. In line with this logic, let us muse a bit about more about Amos, a sheep herder, sycamore tree dresser, and country prophet. During the relatively peaceful reigns of King Uzziah in Judah and King Jeroboam II in Israel, Amos prophesied doom and destruction. Having this backdrop in mind is terribly important for a well-formed picture of the prophet's central concerns, which are inseparably tied to his social situation: merchants defrauding customers in the marketplace (Amos 2:6); the religiously arrogant defaming worship (2:8; 5:21-24); father and son committing morally reprehensible sexual acts (2:7); the wealthy and self-indulgent minority enjoying and parading their material excess (2:8; 6:4-7); acts of bribery and dishonest governmental practices privileging few and disenfranchising others (5:11-12).

Then, as interpreters of scripture, we arrive at chapter 8 with eyes wide open to hear the rationale behind the judgment of the exasperated Sovereign, who says to the reluctant-turned-strident message bearer, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day ... the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place" (8:2-3). Why? Because the powerful "trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land" (8:4).

When the abuse of the poor represents the spirit of the times, while the deceitful "all day long ... are plotting destruction" for others (Psalm 52:1-2) because they "love evil

more than good ... lying more than speaking the truth" (verse 3), then what the psalmist intones as true for the ancients bears truth for those of us who fail to take refuge in God today. Truth be told, "God will break you down forever; God will snatch and tear you from your tent; God will uproot you from the land of the living" (verse 5).

JULY 28

COME AND PRAY

HOSEA 1:2-10; PSALM 85; COLOSSIANS 2:6-19; LUKE 11:1-13

After Jesus finished praying in a certain place, one of his disciples requests spiritual guidance: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Jesus responds by offering them Christianity's best-known invocation—the Lord's Prayer. In fact, this is the only prayer that Jesus gives us. It is the model. In its words of petition, we get a glimpse of an alternative reality, what it means to participate with God in repairing the severed lines of communication between creature and Creator. Luke's Jesus, the rabbi of all rabbis, is a sage and prayer teacher who provides wisdom for finding safe haven in an unsafe world.

But the curious thing to notice about this prayer is its petitionary tone. Luke's record contains no appeals for divine favor. What we have here in Luke's record are five requests for God to act. Every petition in the Lord's Prayer is a request for nearness: Teach us to pray so we can know we are not alone in this world, give us food daily for our bodies, embrace us so we might know we have been forgiven, and let your kingdom come, let it come as near as it is out of our reach. These are all requests for real presence, except the final petition: Let no trial come our way. Do not bring us into the time of trial.

The Lord's Prayer is not some perfunctory prayer for the faint at heart. Martin Luther King Jr.'s mother was slain by a mentally deranged man while she was at her church's organ playing the Lord's Prayer set to music. If we carefully consider this prayer, we discover that persistence—asking, seeking, knocking—gets rewarded with the gift of divine compassion.

God's gift of real presence is the site of God's kingdom at hand. When we pray as Luke's Jesus instructs us to pray, we find a God who meets our needs and teaches us how to give of ourselves in benevolent and gracious ways. ✱

**WHO KNOWS? THE SOCIAL
PARIAH NEXT DOOR MAY BE OUR
WINDOW OF HOPE WHEN WE ARE
LEFT FOR DEAD.**

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H'rumps



NEW LOOK, SAME ATTITUDE

By Ed Spivey Jr.

It's no surprise to my loyal readers—both of them—that when I'm not writing this column, I'm spending the other 97 percent of my time working as art director for *Sojourners* magazine, the magazine you are now holding, or perhaps reading on the floor, if you're doing planks. (I used to do planks every morning but stopped after the internet said that planks are less important than a healthy breakfast. I think it was an ad for Egg McMuffins.)

The fact that I'm the art director is actually printed at the end of my column but, let's be honest, how many readers get that far?

I mention my day job to point out—if you haven't noticed yet—that *Sojourners* has been completely redesigned. New logo, new typeface, lots of white space. We did this on your behalf, not because you asked for it, but because we thought it makes the magazine more interesting and readable. So, you're welcome.

IT WAS A GROUP EFFORT, BECAUSE THERE'S NO "I" IN COLLABORATIVE, EXCEPT FOR THAT ONE NEAR THE END.

I'd like to say I did the whole project myself (I said it out loud in the shower just this morning), but it would be less than true. I wanted to, but the editor distracted me with sugary snacks, then asked me to pick up his dry cleaning, in Nebraska. By the time I returned, Metaleap Creative, a professional design firm, had completed most of the work. It's a shame I missed it, because I had some new ideas of my own like ... like ... well, it's too late anyway.

To be clear, I *was* an integral part of the process. I distinctly remember nodding significantly at several points in the discussions, and at one crucial meeting I even briefly looked up from my doughnut.

The new design pays homage to our earliest days of publication, when the magazine was on newsprint, the graphics were big and bold, and the editors frequently asked, "Why write 600 words when 2,000 will do?" We were loud, we were proud, and we were wordy. Although we've left behind the longer word counts—it turns out pithy is better; who knew?—the new *Sojourners* recaptures the energy from those early years that still drives our work for justice.

The cover of our first issue in 1971 depicted a mournful Jesus covered in an American flag, calling out the shame of a church supporting an unjust war. The temptation today is to run that cover every issue, expanding the list of causes for Jesus' lament to include racism, economic inequality, and environmental calamity, to name but three. Turns out, our magazine *still* needs to be loud and proud of our calling to biblical faithfulness, and our new design is part of that commitment. (And if it makes us look cool in the process, well, it can't be helped.)

Sadly, with its emphasis on graphics, there's less space for words. But for my column, we'll make room. Because when it comes to compelling, award-winning prose, there can never be a limit on how much the

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.

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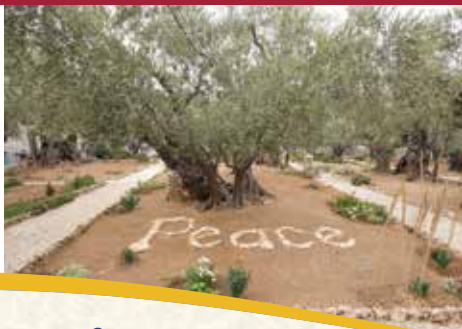


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